

**Christchurch**

Order of Service

10.45 a.m. on Sunday, 15th August 2021

***The Gathering***

**Welcome and call to worship**

Jesus said:

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.  
I am the way, the truth and the life.  
I am the light of the world.*

**All God of wisdom, truth and light,  
we come together to worship you,  
eager to hear your word for us  
and learn more of your ways.  
By your spirit, help us to grow in your wisdom,  
to be guided in your truth,  
and to walk in your light, everyday of our lives. Amen.**

Good morning, my name is Julian Blakemore and I am a minister in the North Herts Methodist Circuit. Joining me here at Christchurch this morning are musicians Mike Crowley, Catriona Bevan and Lisa Morgan, our reader is Euan Gilfillan and looking after the technology is Tony Edmonds.

**Hymn**

God of grace and God of glory,  
on your people pour your power;  
crown your ancient Church's story,  
bring her bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage  
for the facing of this hour.

Heal your children's warring madness;  
bend our pride to your control;  
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

Lo, the hosts of evil round us  
scorn your Christ, assail his ways!  
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;  
free our hearts to work and praise.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the living of these days.

*Words: Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)*

*Tune: Rhuddlan*

## Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Let us pray.

All-seeing and all-knowing God,  
whose wisdom surpasses all human thought,  
whose truth is unquestionable,  
and whose light banishes darkness,  
for the glimpses of your glory that you have shared with us:  
**We praise and adore you**

For the gift of your Son  
who inspires us by his example,  
for the Holy Spirit who assures us of your presence with us,  
and for the promise of your kingdom:  
**We praise and adore you.**

Where life remains shrouded in mystery  
and things happen that we don't yet fully understand,  
we know we can trust in you,  
because you want the best for us  
and, in Christ, nothing can ever separate us from you love:  
**We praise and adore you.**

Accept, we pray, this our offering of worship  
and as we seek to draw closer to you,  
open our minds and our hearts  
to more of the wonders of your wisdom, truth and light.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All Amen.**

Merciful God,  
you know us through and through,  
and accept us as the well-intentioned but imperfect people we are.  
So it is, trusting in your great love and compassion that we bow our heads before you  
to confess our faults, to seek your forgiveness and to ask for your help in the future.

God of wisdom and grace, forgive us when we are arrogant and think we know best. Give us  
humility to admit when we are wrong or don't know. Help us to learn from our mistakes  
that our weaknesses may be transformed into strength. Enable us to be more faithful  
followers of Christ, that we might learn from him and continue to grow in wisdom and  
knowledge of you.

**All** Look upon us with love:  
**Help us to do better**

God of truth and love, forgive us when we struggle with being honest and find it difficult to  
face up to the truth. When we need to stand up for the truth, grant us the courage we need  
and guide our words and actions. If we don't understand, give us a hunger and thirst for the  
truth and the discernment to recognise it. Keep us on your path, the path of truth.

**All** Look upon us with love:  
**Help us to do better**

God of light and life, forgive us when we prefer hiding in the darkness rather than living in  
the light of your presence. Give us the confidence to step out in faith and use the gifts you

have given us to your glory. Open our eyes to see how we can help those in need and, through our care and concern for them, make the world a brighter place.

Look upon us with love:  
**All Help us to do better**

*[Silence]*

Merciful God,  
who accepts everyone and turns no one away empty-handed,  
we thank you for restoring our relationship with you and with each other  
through your forgiveness and grace.  
Assure us of your love and presence with us always  
and enable us to be beacons of your wisdom, truth and light in the world.  
For Christ's sake.

**All Amen.**

## ***The Ministry of the Word***

### **Old Testament Reading**

Proverbs 9.1-6  
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup> Wisdom has built her house,  
she has hewn her seven pillars.  
<sup>2</sup> She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,  
she has also set her table.  
<sup>3</sup> She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls  
from the highest places in the town,  
<sup>4</sup> "You that are simple, turn in here!"  
To those without sense she says,  
<sup>5</sup> "Come, eat of my bread  
and drink of the wine I have mixed."  
<sup>6</sup> Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
and walk in the way of insight."

### **New Testament Reading**

Ephesians 5.15-20  
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup> Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Hymn**

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you  
to receive the food of your holy word.  
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;  
shape and fashion us in your likeness,

that the light of Christ might be seen today  
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.  
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us  
all your purposes, for your glory.

Teach us, Lord, full obedience,  
holy reverence, true humility.  
Test our thoughts and our attitudes  
in the radiance of your purity.  
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see  
your majestic love and authority.  
Words of power that can never fail;  
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;  
help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us.  
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time  
that will echo down through eternity.  
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,  
and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.  
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built  
and the earth is filled with your glory.

*Words: Keith Getty (b. 1974) and Stuart Townend (b. 1963)*

*Tune: Speak, O Lord*

## Reflection

I've been moved by this morning's readings to talk about three things that appear to be in very short supply in our society at the moment. These shortages haven't been caused by the pandemic, or the pingdemic, or even Brexit, but we'd surely have been a lot better placed in dealing with such crises if there'd been more of them around. They're not things that can be bought on our high streets, in our supermarkets, or in our out-of-town shopping malls. They're harder to come by than that. But they are things that we, as Christians, can, and should, help make more readily available and look to encourage in others.

If you're wondering about the answer to my riddle, I'll tell you - I'm talking about wisdom and her close relatives, truth and light. We might not realise it, but they disappear when we're not paying attention and we miss them when they're not there.

The book of Proverbs, together with Job, some of the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) comprise the biblical wisdom literature. Outside the biblical canon, the Book of Wisdom and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) can be found in the Apocrypha. They reveal the collected wisdom of generations of godly people and invite us to consider the core question of how to live wisely in God's world.

Proverbs is a collection of poems and sayings from sages serving in the courts of Israel and Judah. It raises questions of values, moral behaviour, the meaning of human life, and right conduct, and its theological foundation is that "the fear of God (meaning submission to the will of God) is the beginning of wisdom".

The sages' wisdom is personified as a woman reaching out to humankind, but the importance of parents as teachers is also emphasised to ensure that wisdom is passed down from generation to generation. Human wisdom is seen as an expression of divine wisdom, so Wisdom herself speaks with the authority of God. She is also depicted as playing a key role in creation, working alongside God, weaving his ideas together and encapsulating his joy and delight in all that he has made. To the discerning person, the wisdom of God is visible in the wonder, beauty and majesty of his creation.

Our reading this morning presents us with a little vignette in which Wisdom invites us to sit with her, enjoy her food, wine and company. The point is that wisdom doesn't come easily. We have to spend time developing a close, intimate relationship with wisdom, feasting on the good things collected in this book so that we might find wisdom for life. But is something that has to be worked at and cultivated. Wisdom isn't something that can be learned by rote or measured in an exam. It can only be acquired through careful thought and reflection on life. Ultimately, this is a story about how God shares his wisdom with those who'll give him some time and attention.

The passage goes on to contrast Wisdom's invitation with that of her alter-ego, Folly. Both women are eager to attract those who are 'simple' or lacking understanding who most need to dine with Wisdom but are tempted to dine with Folly. To those who're receptive, Wisdom offers not only bread and wine but guidance. These are free gifts from God that she uses to lead those who approach her into a proper relationship with God, equipping them to live a righteous life and walk in the way of insight. Folly entices those who are arrogant enough to think that they can acquire the same benefits with no effort. She tells them that drinking stolen water is sweet and eating bread in secret is pleasant. This may sound exciting but the truth is that it won't provide wisdom for life. The choice we have is clear. Wisdom is an old-fashioned word that isn't so much in vogue today. Some of the words we attempt to use in wisdom's place like intelligence, common sense, know-how, or acumen, might have more of an everyday feel but we lose something in the process because they don't fully convey its original meaning. Wisdom in this sense isn't something we're born with. It only comes from desiring God, seeking to understand more of his will and wisdom and trying to walk in his ways. The pursuit of God's wisdom takes us out of ourselves and our selfish preoccupations, gives us a different, broader perspective on life and changes our priorities which, in turn, provides a solid foundation on which to base our choices and decisions in life. What's more, being in a loving relationship with God means that we're accepted for who we are and when we make mistakes, as we inevitably will from time to time, we can admit and learn from them without jeopardising that relationship. We can also listen to others who're on the same journey and learn from their mistakes so that we don't have to repeat them ourselves. In this way, we grow in wisdom as we learn in love.

The wisdom theme is also picked up in the passage we read from chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians as Paul puts his own spin on what it means for a wise person to live well. In this way he shows how wisdom relates to truth and light – they're all marks of walking faithfully in God's ways.

The wider context of the chapter is an encouragement to be imitators of God and live as 'children of light,' for 'the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.' In the light everything is visible and nothing is hidden so Paul reminds them in very general terms that the children of light must be careful to live not as unwise people but as wise. He urges them to live exemplary lives and make sure they have nothing to hide. They are to make the most of their time and keep their wits about them because they live in evil times and mustn't be taken in by the attractions of the world around them. Unlike the foolish who turn their backs on God, they have an understanding of what he wants and being filled with God's Spirit will enable them to continue to discern and do his will. From Paul's general appeal to behave wisely, hearers are probably expected to fill in the detail for themselves from the other teaching that Paul has already provided. So, for example, alongside maintaining their worship and expressing their thankfulness to God, it would be a good use of their time to work hard, be honest, speak the truth, and so on.

We, too, live in times that are troubled and turbulent, where evil is an ever-present danger. Never has the need been greater for wisdom, truth and light in our world. Living with the virus might seem like a life choice but for an alarming number of people every day it's still a death sentence. For many others it can result in lives being irreparably changed or being placed on hold due to the debilitating effects of long Covid. What is God's voice on this? The NHS remains under intense pressure due to continuing high demand for its services and massive waiting lists. What is God's voice on this? The climate emergency hasn't gone away while we've all been distracted by the pandemic and the incidence of extreme weather events is increasing. What is God's voice on this? Armed conflict continues to tear countries and regions apart, causing death, suffering and destruction, displacing populations and

turning them into refugees. What is God's voice on this? Our politics and our society have become extremely polarised and a unifying vision is lacking. What is God's voice on this? Like me, you might bemoan the apparent lack of wisdom in the way the world's leaders and governments behave in the face of the challenges we are facing. Like me, you might be exasperated by the blatant and cynical lies and disregard for truth. Like me, you might be frustrated at the lack of action and the way that the tough choices and difficult decisions that urgently need to be made are dodged and delayed.

Why is it like this? Where has wisdom gone? Why doesn't truth seem to matter anymore? Where is the light at the end of the tunnel? I believe that there are two reasons why we're in the state we're in. Firstly, wisdom, truth and light began to disappear about the time we stopped expecting them and stopped holding those in authority to account when they don't behave wisely, truthfully and in the best interests of all those they serve. I'm not suggesting that any of the challenges we face are easy to deal with but for much needed change to happen, we need to expect more from those in leadership positions to help them be better. Secondly, we're all too preoccupied with ourselves – who and what we think we are – to be fully open to God's promptings, guidance and challenge in our lives. We have to be prepared to take a step back and make the time to listen for God's voice, to try and see the situation as he might see it and understand what he would have us do.

Jesus stands in the wisdom tradition but not just as a teacher. As God's son, he embodies God's wisdom in the same way that he embodies God's truth and light. During his earthly ministry, he found ways to challenge conventional assumptions and the values of most people, including those in power, through parables and sayings, questioning motives and analysing behaviour, shining God's light into dark places and standing up for the truth. We have to believe that God's wisdom, truth and light are as relevant now as they've ever been in helping us to transform the world and bring his kingdom to fulfilment.

God's wisdom, truth and light are inseparable. They're bound together in his love. As Christ's followers, we're called to embody and channel them into the world through our love for God and for our neighbour. To do that we have to take time to develop our relationship with God through Christ. Learning from him and from each other, and filled with his Spirit, we're equipped to share his wisdom, truth and light in our homes, through our work and in our social groups as we become the people he would have us be. Amen.

## Prayers of Thanksgiving and Dedication

Lord God, for all the good things in life we enjoy:

**All We give you thanks and praise!**

For sending your Son into the world to reveal your love for us:

**All We give you thanks and praise!**

For putting your spirit within us to transform our hearts and minds:

**All We give you thanks and praise!**

For inviting us to live as children of light:

**All We give you thanks and praise!**

We respond to your love for us by offering ourselves,  
all that we have and all that we are,  
to your service.

**All Take us and use us, through the power of your Holy Spirit,  
so that your will may be done  
and your kingdom come through our lives.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

## Prayers of Intercession

All-seeing and all-knowing God,

we pray today for those who seek wisdom, truth and light in their lives.

We pray for  
all who have authority and influence over others:  
for the leaders of nations and our own government;  
for church leaders;  
for teachers;  
for health and care staff;  
for our emergency services;  
for all who provide essential services.

Lord, help them to exercise their responsibilities with wisdom, compassion and integrity, to be selfless in their service.

Lord in your mercy,  
**All Hear our prayer**

We pray for  
those who study and research into:  
the workings of our universe;  
the deep mysteries of life;  
the complexities of this world;  
the mechanics of science;  
health and medicine;  
epidemiology and vaccines;  
the climate crisis.

Give them insight and humility, patience and dedication in their work. As they seek to broaden our knowledge and deepen our understanding of life by asking questions, let them be listened to and learned from. May they receive the respect they deserve.

Lord in your mercy,  
**All Hear our prayer**

We pray for  
those who work in the mass media:  
journalists, reporters, photographers, film camera operators;  
editors of news programmes and newspapers;  
producers, directors and presenters;  
authors and script-writers;  
all those who in different ways have the power to shape public opinion.

Give them honesty and integrity, courage and perception in all they do. Enable them to speak to those in power and hold them to account, to give a voice to the voiceless, and to bring to light issues that matter.

Lord in your mercy,  
**All Hear our prayer**

We pray for  
those who lives are full of darkness and suffering because they live under the shadow of:  
conflict;  
poverty and deprivation;  
illness, disease and disability;  
extreme weather conditions;  
persecution;  
bereavement and loss.

Give them hope and comfort, justice and relief from their pain and hardship.

Lord in your mercy,

**All Hear our prayer**

We pray for  
all other people and situations we know to be in need.

*[Silence]*

Lord, show us ways in which we can help that they may know your love surrounding them.

**All Lord in your mercy,  
Hear our prayer**

Lord, as your people, keep us faithful to you. Enable us to fulfil our calling to share your love and bring your wisdom, truth and light to a world in need.

**All In the name of Christ.  
Amen**

## The Lord's Prayer

**All Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

## Hymn

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,  
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;  
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,  
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,  
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;  
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;  
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:  
be thou mine inheritance now and always;  
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:  
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,  
O grant me its joys after victory is won;  
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

*Words: Irish, 8<sup>th</sup> century  
translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931)  
versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860-1935) (alt.)  
Tune: Slane*

## ***Blessing and Dismissal***

God, as you send us out into the week ahead,  
make us wise in our understanding,  
unwavering in our regard for the truth,  
and aglow with your unfailing light,  
that we might reflect your glory into the world.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding,  
keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,  
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;  
and the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be amongst us, and remain with us always.

**All     Amen.**